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Chef's Apron

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Oh shoot! It's that time of year again. It's time to reflect on the past twelve months and think about plans and resolutions for the New Year. Frigid temperatures and icy winds are hardly conducive to thinking about changes or making big plans. If by chance you fell short on some of your 2010 goals, now is not a good time to be reminded. Not when you're shivering and your most notable, recent achievement is a graceless triple axel performed on a patch of black ice in front of the post office. With short days and long, cold nights, January seems like an excellent time to hunker down with a cup of cocoa and ignore the big, bad world.

Unfortunately the Romans picked January for this reflecting back and looking forward thing more than 2,000 years ago. So it looks like we are stuck with it. As I look back on 2010, it seemed like every day brought a new story of thoughtless bullying, greed or worse. So here's an idea, let's all focus on one simple goal for 2011: Be Nice.

Be Nice. Hmmmm. It sounds a bit bland, maybe even insipid and certainly goody-two-shoes. Hardly revolutionary, it's the kind of advice that our mothers and grandmothers gave us when we were little kids. While being nice might not win many prizes, the results could surprise us. The powers that be in Concord and Washington, on Wall Street and in Hollywood may not notice but plenty others will.

Here are five simple ways to be nice in 2011:

Smile often. Smile when you feel happy and even when you don't. Scientists have not only discovered that smiling makes you feel better, it's also contagious. What a great twofer!

Say thank you, like you mean it and do. Everyone likes to be appreciated. Unfortunately, it's all too easy to rush through life, never slowing down long enough to say thank you. In all the hustle and bustle, we simply forget to voice our appreciation. A simple, sincere thank you lets family, friends, even strangers know that we are grateful for their help, support and good deeds, large and small. Plus there is an added bonus to saying thank you. More often than not the person you thank will reward you with a beautiful smile and you'll both feel great.

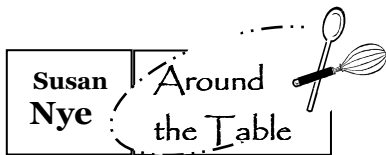
Say hello. No one wants to feel like they're invisible so a cheery good morning, even a simple nod, is always appreciated. No, you needn't say hello to one and all as you weave your way down a crowded sidewalk. But do put your cell phone down and greet the clerk at the supermarket checkout or your colleagues as you arrive at the office. It only takes a moment. Likewise, there is nothing wrong (and a whole lot right) with a quick wave to a neighbor as you pass by on your morning walk.

Practice simple acts of kindness. Hold a door or better yet carry a bag of groceries for someone. Shovel your neighbor's walk. Volunteer to be the designated driver on New Year's Eve. Donate blood. Admit you made a mistake. And apologize. Hug a loved one. The list is endless and most acts cost you nothing but a little bit of time. Time is becoming an increasingly rare commodity these days. Giving freely of your time, even a few minutes, is a gift more precious than gold.

If you have nothing nice to say, say nothing at all. If my mother gave me this line once, she gave it hundreds of times. Still I continued to clench my fists, stamp my foot and call my sister a stupid head. When I got older, my cutting comments and critiques grew wittier and more glib. Until, eventually, I realized Mom was right. I still slip; I get tempted and fall. Hey, I'm a work in progress. Aren't we all?

Have a nice New Year!

Bon appétit!



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**PO Box 1875 - New London
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Beef Tenderloin with Red Wine Mushroom Sauce

A great dish for New Year's Eve! Enjoy!

Serves about 12

About 5 pounds beef tenderloin roast, trimmed, tied and at room temperature

Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper

Olive oil

2 pound mushrooms, cleaned and thinly sliced

2 shallots or 1 medium red onion, minced

3 cloves garlic, minced

1 teaspoon herbs de Provence

1 cup dry red wine

1 tablespoon Dijon mustard

1-2 tablespoons cognac

1-2 tablespoons butter, cut into pieces

1 tablespoon fresh, chopped Italian parsley

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.
2. Pat the beef dry; sprinkle liberally with salt and pepper. Heat a little olive oil in a large flameproof roasting pan over medium-high heat. Brown the beef well on all sides; it should take about 10 minutes.
3. Transfer the pan to the oven and roast for 20-35 minutes or until a thermometer inserted 2 inches into the center of the roast registers at 110 degrees for rare or 125 degrees for medium-rare.
4. While the beef roasts, combine the mushrooms, shallots and garlic in large, heavy skillet; sprinkle with herbs de Provence, salt and pepper and toss. Sauté over medium-high heat until the mushrooms are lightly browned and tender and all of the liquid has been absorbed, about 10 minutes. (If you prefer, you can do this step in advance. Cool to room temperature and then refrigerate.)
5. Remove the roasting pan from the oven, transfer the beef to a cutting board and cover loosely with foil. The beef will continue to cook until it reaches 120 degrees for rare or 130 degrees for medium rare.
6. Drain any excess fat from the roasting pan and set it on the stovetop over medium-high heat. Add the wine, bring to a boil and simmer for a few minutes, scraping up the brown bits in the pan. Whisk in the mustard and then pour the liquid into the skillet with the mushrooms. Simmer, stirring frequently, until the liquid is reduced by about a third, about 10 minutes.
7. Stir in the cognac and cook for 1-2 minutes. Whisk in the butter. Check for seasoning, sprinkle with chopped parsley and transfer to a serving dish.
8. Remove the string from the beef and discard. Cut the beef into 1/2 inch slices and serve with the mushroom sauce.

If beef tenderloin is not in your budget this year, pork tenderloin is a delicious substitute. Cook to 140 degrees and use white instead of red wine in the sauce.